

Leadership and school-wide climate responses

Schools can take actions to mitigate and reduce the impacts of climate change, and help communities to adapt to life in a climate-changed and low-carbon future. School-wide approaches can help to show young people that they are not alone in their concerns about climate change.



School-wide approaches matter

NZCER's 2020 survey of secondary schools suggested that while schools are generally supportive of *student* leadership and action on climate and sustainability, these are much less likely to be school-wide priorities, or embedded in school-wide action and leadership.¹

International models of climate-ready schooling emphasise whole-school approaches that encompass leadership, governance, teaching and learning, school facilities and operations, and community partnerships (Gibb, 2016). Leaders of all kinds, such as school leaders, are “uniquely positioned to foster new levels of support for climate solutions” and can help by becoming climate-literate and being “vocal, model leaders within [their] communities” (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 8).

Showing leadership in times of uncertainty

Many young people around the world have expressed fears and concerns about climate change, and demanded faster action from governments, businesses, and leaders across society. Some adults worry about the mental

health impacts for young people who may be experiencing climate anxiety. The instinct to shield and protect young people from psychological distress is understandable, but ignoring climate change or telling young people there is nothing to worry about does not address the validity of their concerns.

The Australian Psychological Society (2017) provides eight strategies to help people to engage with the challenge of climate change, using the acronym A.C.T.I.V.A.T.E. The first T stands for “talk about it”, and the I stands for “inspire positive visions”. The American Psychological Association (Clayton et al., 2017) includes five top tips for leaders and practitioners responding to climate concerns: (1) build belief in one's own resilience, (2) foster optimism, (3) cultivate active coping and self-regulation skills, (4) maintain practices that help to provide a sense of meaning, and (5) promote connectedness to family, place, culture, and community.

The education sector's response during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the ability to adapt to an emergency situation with positivity, care, and compassion. Some secondary teachers surveyed by NZCER said the COVID-19 response was a useful opportunity to engage students and colleagues in discussions how these same kinds of responses can apply to the climate crisis.

1. See <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/climate-change-and-sustainability-secondary-schools-report>

“I model to students how adults don’t have it all sussed but that we can be calm, rational and caring during such uncertain times.

(Secondary teacher, NZCER survey response, 2020).”

Facilities and operations

There are direct climate benefits to reducing the environmental footprint of school operations and infrastructure, reducing waste, and seeking more efficient, cleaner, and longer-lasting alternatives. Schools can also have a direct influence on living systems within or near the school grounds. Planting trees, building and sustaining food gardens, composting, worm farming, beekeeping, avoiding food waste, and building healthy soil all have climate impact benefits, as well as presenting rich opportunities for student learning and engagement.

In November 2019 the Government announced that there would be more support for schools to reduce energy consumption and environmental impact, including a \$5m contestable fund for sustainability initiatives such as installing solar panels, replacing inefficient heating systems, and removing coal boilers. In December 2020, the Government announced a goal for the public sector to be carbon neutral by 2025. School Boards of Trustees and tertiary providers were included “in principle” as one of the groups that would be directed to measure, verify, and report on emissions, subject to the Ministry of Education further work and a report back about when the offsetting obligation applies, and feasibility of their inclusion.²

The policy decisions that come from this work may have a big impact for school leaders and Boards of Trustees. Educational leaders can be proactive in preparing for what may come next by

building their own climate literacy, and exploring what schools can do to contribute to reducing Aotearoa New Zealand’s carbon footprint, and supporting communities in the transition to a low-emissions future.

Questions to discuss in your school

- How climate-informed are our school leaders, staff, and Board of Trustees?
- How can we build our own knowledge and understanding of climate impacts and how to reduce climate emissions?
- Are we modelling climate-conscious leadership and action to our students and communities?
- What can we learn from other schools who are further along the track?

References

Australian Psychological Society (2017). *Climate change empowerment handbook. Psychological strategies to tackle climate change*. <https://www.psychology.org.au/for-the-public/Psychology-topics/Climate-change-psychology/Climate-change>

Clayton, S., Manning, C., Krygsman, K., & Speiser, M. (2017). *Mental health and our changing climate: Impacts, implications, and guidance*. American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/03/mental-health-climate.pdf>

Gibb, N. (2016). *Getting climate-ready: A guide for schools on climate action*. UNESCO. https://www.unesco.de/sites/default/files/2019-03/Getting_Climate-Ready-Guide_Schools.pdf

² See <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/public-sector-be-carbon-neutral-2025>

